1
Systemic Racism
A Comprehensive Perspective

> We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.
>
> **Preamble, U.S. Constitution**

> The American idea is the nation's holiday garb, its festive dress, its Sunday best. It covers up an everyday practice of betraying the claims of equality, justice, and democracy.
>
> **John Hope Franklin**

The year is 1787, the place Philadelphia. Fifty-five men are meeting in summer's heat to write a constitution for what will be called the "first democratic nation." These pathbreaking founders create a document so radical in breaking from monarchy and feudal institutions that it will be condemned and attacked in numerous European countries. These determined radicals are all men of European origin, and most are well-off by the standards of their day. Significantly, at least 40 percent have been or are slaveowners, and a significant proportion of the others profit as merchants, shippers, lawyers, and bankers from the trade in slaves, commerce in slave-produced agricultural products, or supplying provisions to slaveholders and slave-traders.[1] The man who pressed hard for this convention and chairs it, George Washington, is one of the very richest men in the colonies because of the hundreds of black men, women, and children he has long held in bondage. Washington and his colleagues create the first "democratic" nation, yet one for whites only. In the preamble to their bold document, the white founders cite prominently "We the People," but this phrase does *not* encompass the fifth of the population that is enslaved or the large indigenous population.

Laying a Racist Foundation: the United States

Many historical analysts have portrayed slavery as only a minor matter at the 1787 Constitutional Convention. Yet slavery was central, as a leading participant, James Madison, made clear in his notes on convention debates. Madison accented how the convention was scissored across a slave/not-slave divide among the new states.[2] Southern and northern regions were gradually diverging in their politico-economic frameworks. Slavery had once been of some importance in most areas, but by the late 1700s and early 1800s the northern states were moving away from chattel slavery as a part of their local economies, and some were seeing a growing abolitionist sentiment. Even so, a great many northern white merchants, shippers, and consumers still depended on products produced by southern and border-state slave plantations, and many merchants sold manufactured goods to the slave plantations. Northern shipbuilders and bankers were also central to the slavery economy.

Debates Influenced by Slavery

While all delegates to the Constitutional Convention agreed that the new government should protect private property, and thus existing economic inequality, this white male elite had a right-wing, a center, and a left-wing. The small left-wing, with its strong views on equality and popular revolution, was closest to the general population, and some of its members had dominated the writing of the more radical Declaration of Independence. At the Constitutional Convention, however, the center and the right-wing had more influence. The right-wing even included 21 delegates who desired some form of monarchy. The left-wing and center were able to successfully counter this desire for monarchy, for that seemed unacceptable to the majority of the population. In numerous provisions the final document was oriented to political liberty: there was agreement on rejecting religious tests for office and an established religion, on protecting freedom of debate in Congress, and on protecting citizens from much arbitrary government. Even so, many conservative and center delegates at the convention were anti-democratic in their thinking, fearing "the masses." Thus, the left-wing of this white elite was unable to add a specific list of individual rights to the Constitution, and some states did not ratify the new document until their populations were persuaded that a democratic Bill of Rights would be added.[3]

The trade in, and enslavement of, people of African descent was an important and divisive issue for the convention. Almost all of these prominent, generally well-educated men accepted the view that people of African descent could be the chattel property of others—and were not human beings with citizens' rights. At the heart of the Constitution was protection of the property and wealth of the affluent bourgeoisie

in the new nation, including property in those enslaved. There was near unanimity on the idea, as delegate Gouverneur Morris (New York) put it, that property is the "main object of Society." For the founders, freedom meant the protection of unequal accumulation of property, particularly property that could produce a profit in the emerging capitalist system. This was not just a political gathering with the purpose of creating a major new bourgeois-democratic government; it was also a meeting to protect the racial and economic interests of men with substantial property and wealth in the colonies. As historian Herbert Aptheker has put it, the Constitution was a "bourgeois-democratic document for the governing of a slaveholder-capitalist republic."[4]

The harsh reality of slavery conditions and the often death-dealing slave trade hung over the convention like a demonic specter. Slavery intruded on important debates, perhaps most centrally on debates over representation in Congress. Northern and southern delegates vigorously argued the matter and reached the famous three-fifths compromise on counting those enslaved for the purpose of *white* representation. Article 1 speaks only of three groups in the new nation: "free persons," "Indians not taxed," and "all other persons." The "other" persons were those enslaved, mostly of African descent. Whether free or enslaved, African Americans were not to be citizens or voters, yet 60 percent of their number could be counted to enlarge white representation in the states. Interestingly, the earlier Articles of Confederation had used the term "white" in setting the formula for enumerating the country's population. The new Constitution made use of the Confederation's language in this regard but without the word "white."[5]

One delegate from Pennsylvania, James Wilson, questioned the three-fifths compromise; he did not see

> on what principle the admission of blacks in the proportion of three-fifths could be explained. Are they admitted as Citizens? Then why are they not admitted on an equality with White Citizens? Are they admitted as property? Then why is not other property admitted into the computation?[6]

The answer, however, was clear. Enslaved blacks were to be counted as human beings only when it suited whites to do so. Otherwise, they were just white property. Some framers of the Constitution realized that they were divesting black people of their humanity. After the convention, the *Federalist Papers* supported the compromise thus:

> Let the case of the slaves be considered as it is in truth, a peculiar one. Let the compromising expedient of the Constitution be mutually adopted, which regards them as inhabitants, but as debased

by servitude below the equal level of free inhabitants; which regards the slave as *divested of two fifths of the man.*[7]

The new country formed by European Americans in the late eighteenth century was openly viewed as a white republic. These founders sought to build a racially based republic in the face of monarchical opposition and against those people on the North American continent they defined as inferior. James Madison, who himself enslaved many black Americans, put it this way: "Next to the case of the black race within our bosom, that of the red on our borders is the problem most baffling to the policy of our country."[8]

The concerns of slaveholders would appear again and again in debates over taxation, the presidency, commerce, and other matters. For example, there were two days of debates over the importation of enslaved Africans into the colonies. A compromise was reached and placed in Article 1, Section 9. This section allowed the brutal trade to continue until at least 1807.[9] At the convention a few delegates spoke critically of chattel slavery or the slave trade. George Mason, himself a prominent Virginia slaveholder, blamed the slave trade on the greed of British merchants. He noted the threat of slave uprisings and argued that slavery made poor whites lazy. As Mason saw it, "every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant." Strikingly, however, Mason did not mention slavery's impact on those in chains.[10] He and delegate Elbridge Gerry (Massachusetts) would later refuse to sign the document, in part because of its slavery provisions. Yet their objections were not moral but political. Mason feared that the continuing slave trade would make the new United States "more vulnerable" and less capable of defense.[11] Not one of the 55 delegates advocated that the abolition of slavery and freedom for all Americans should be an integral part of the new Constitution. On key votes most northern delegations voted with southern delegations, in part because the trade in enslaved workers and slave-produced products was generally of economic benefit to northern traders and merchants.

The "Most Prominent Feature"

In one of the vigorous debates touching on slavery, the wealthy Gouverneur Morris noted cogently that "domestic slavery is the most prominent feature in the aristocratic countenance of the proposed Constitution."[12] By the end of the summer of 1787 there were at least seven sections where the framers had the system of slavery clearly in mind:

1. Article 1, Section 2, which counts slaves as three-fifths of a person;

2. Article 1, Sections 2 and 9, which apportion taxes on the states using the three-fifths formula;
3. Article 1, Section 8, which gives Congress authority to suppress slave and other insurrections;
4. Article 1, Section 9, which prevents the slave trade from being abolished before 1808;
5. Article 1, Sections 9 and 10, which exempt goods made by slaves from export duties;
6. Article 4, Section 2, which requires the return of fugitive slaves; and
7. Article 4, Section 4, which stipulates that the federal government must help state governments put down domestic violence, including slave uprisings.[13]

The founders were generally aware of the oppressiveness of the slavery from which they profited. In spite of their freedom to speak, read, and do business in the colonies, they and other whites often described their *own* sociopolitical condition as one of actual or potential "slavery." Ironically, many publications of the revolutionary period compared whites' colonial conditions under the British king to black enslavement. As early as 1774, George Washington noted the crisis over colonists' rights in this way:

> The crisis is arrived when we must assert our rights, or submit to every imposition, that can be heaped upon us, till custom and use shall make us tame and abject slaves, as the blacks we rule over with such arbitrary sway.[14]

One convention delegate, John Dickinson, expressed the common view: "*Those* who are *taxed* without their own consent, expressed by themselves or their representatives, are *slaves. We are taxed* without our own consent, expressed by ourselves or our representatives. We are therefore—SLAVES."[15] Dickinson was at one time the largest slaveholder in Philadelphia. Dickinson, Washington, and other white leaders described slavery as creating people who would be cowardly and inferior.

Generally, the founders viewed Americans from Africa as slaves by *natural law.* Natural law was also used to explain why the white male founders and their compatriots could subordinate two other large groups—white women and Native Americans. White women were not directly mentioned in the Constitution, and their legal rights under local and national laws were limited. In Article 1 of the Constitution, the section dealing with Congress regulating interstate and foreign commerce adds relations with "Indian tribes," indicating that indigenous peoples were not generally seen by the founders as part of their new nation. Until the mid- to late-nineteenth century, indigenous societies were generally

viewed as separate nations, with some whites advocating treaty-making, land purchases, and the "civilizing" of indigenous Americans while others pressed for land theft, extermination, or removal of all indigenous Americans to the distant western areas.[16]

A House Founded on Racism

Antiblack racism is centrally about the lived experiences and interactions of black and white Americans. Historical events reflect and embed the tangible realities of everyday life—the means of concrete oppression and the means of symbolizing and thinking about that oppression. Every day in the U.S. many politicians, columnists, teachers, lawyers, executives, and ordinary Americans cite the U.S. Constitution, and the founders' actions, as the glory of U.S. society. The founders' decisions and understandings still shape our lives in many ways.

An "Agreement with Hell"?

The U.S. Constitutional Convention, the first such in the democratic history of the modern world, laid a strong base for the new societal "house" called the United States. Yet, from the beginning, this house's foundation was fundamentally flawed. While most Americans have thought of this document and the sociopolitical structure it created as keeping the nation together, in fact this structure was created to maintain racial separation and oppression at the time and for the foreseeable future. The framers reinforced and legitimated a system of racial oppression that they thought would ensure that whites, especially men of means, would rule for centuries.

The system they created was riddled with social contradictions that have surfaced repeatedly over the course of U.S. history. By the 1840s, for example, many black and white abolitionists were aggressively protesting slavery and the constitutional document undergirding it. Before this period there had been white antislavery advocates—black Americans, of course, had advocated abolition from the beginning—but large-scale action against the slavery system did not take place until the nineteenth century. At one 1843 meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society, a resolution was adopted: "Resolved, that the Compact which exists between the North and the South is a 'covenant with death, and an agreement with hell'—involving both parties in atrocious criminality—and should be immediately annulled." At a gathering in Massachusetts on July 4, 1854, the eminent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison burned a copy of the U.S. Constitution, uttering the words: "So perish all compromises with tyranny."[17]

The "Normality" of Slavery

Then, as now, this was not the prevailing view. Indeed, in the first two centuries of the new country most European Americans, in spite of a professed ethic of liberty, implemented or accepted the brutal subordination of black Americans and the driving away or killing of indigenous peoples. Religious leaders like Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan, and William Penn, a Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania, owned black Americans. The founder of U.S. psychiatry, Dr. Benjamin Rush, owned a black American. Men of politics like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, and Sam Houston enslaved black Americans. Ten U.S. presidents (Washington, Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James Polk, Zachary Taylor, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S. Grant) at some point enslaved African Americans.[18]

Many at the head of the new United States supported, or were not uncomfortable with, the idea of a *permanent* slave society. Even the first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, often called the "Great Emancipator," was willing to support a constitutional amendment making slavery permanent in the existing southern states if that would prevent a civil war. Such a projected pro-slavery amendment was supported by many Republicans and was actually approved by the U.S. Congress in early 1861. Indeed, from the 1780s to the Civil War period, some slaveholders articulated grand visions of expanding the U.S. slavery system across the continent and the globe.[19]

The combination of white freedom and black enslavement seems radically contradictory. Historian William Wiecek notes that "the paradox dissolves when we recall that North American slavery was racial. White freedom was entirely compatible with black enslavement."[20] Indeed, the work of those enslaved brought the wealth and leisure that whites, especially in the ruling elite, could use to pursue their own liberty. Various U.S. analysts have argued that it is unfair to judge early white enslavers by contemporary standards. However, not only were there many outspoken black opponents of slavery in this early era, there were numerous opponents of slavery among whites. For example, one of the most wealthy slaveowners in the colonies, Robert Carter III, freed all 500 of the African Americans he enslaved, for he had come to view slavery as "contrary to the principles of religion and justice."[21] Robert Carter was well-known to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington, the most prominent slaveholders among the founders. They just ignored the views and examples before them *in their own time.* In addition, the founders themselves sometimes exhibited guilt over slavery. James Madison himself argued that it would be wrong to state openly in the Constitution the "idea that there could be property

in men."[22] As a result, the words "slave" and "slavery" do not appear there, but are replaced with euphemistic terminology in the U.S. Constitution's sections dealing with the slavery system.

Into the mid-nineteenth century, most whites—in the elites and among ordinary folk—participated directly in slavery or the economic trade around slavery, or did not object to those who did so. The antihuman savagery of slavery was considered *normal* in what was seen as a white republic. This point must be understood well if one is to probe deeply into the origins, maintenance, and persistence of racist patterns and institutions in North America. The savvy W.E.B. Du Bois put this forcefully in summing up European **colonialism** in the Americas and elsewhere, saying:

> There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women and ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the world.[23]

A Continuing Foundation

European colonialism and imperialism eventually reached much of the globe and created a *global racial order*, which has had severe consequences for the world's peoples for centuries. The U.S. Constitution, which embraced slavery and imbedded the global racist order in the U.S., remains the nation's legal, political, and—to a substantial degree—moral foundation. Its openly racist provisions, though overridden by later constitutional amendments, have not been deleted. At no point has a new, truly democratic Constitutional Convention been held to replace this document with one created by representatives of all the people, including the great majority of the U.S. population not represented at the 1787 Convention. Moreover, the racist spirit and impact of the original document persists today. Even as they live in, and often maintain, a racist system, most white Americans still do not see slavery, legal segregation, or contemporary racism as part of the nation's continuing foundation. At the most, the majority see racist institutions as something in the distant past, something tacked on to a great nation for a short time, and something non-systemic. From their perspective the serious racism that may have once intruded into the U.S. house has been substantially eradicated.

Conceptualizing Systemic Racism

A Rich Conceptual Tradition

The black intellectual tradition is a rich source for developing a more accurate and systemic view of this U.S. house of racism. Drawing on analyses of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Oliver Cox, Anna Julia Cooper, Kwame Ture, among others, I accent here a conceptual framework understanding this white racism as centuries-long, deep-lying, institutionalized, and systemic. As I suggested in the Preface, systemic racism includes a diverse assortment of racist practices: the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites; the continuing resource inequalities; the rationalizing white-racist frame; and the major institutions created to preserve white advantage and power.

Frederick Douglass was one of the first analysts to develop a conceptual approach accenting institutionalized racism. In 1881, speaking about the ubiquitous impact of racist prejudice and discrimination, he argued that

> in nearly every department of American life [black Americans] are confronted by this insidious influence. It fills the air. It meets them at the work-shop and factory, when they apply for work. It meets them at the church, at the hotel, at the ballot-box, and worst of all, it meets them in the jury-box ... [the black American] has ceased to be a *slave of an individual*, but has in some sense become *the slave of society*.[24]

No longer did a small group of slaveholders hold black Americans in chains; the *total racist society* held them in bondage. This broad conception of racism permeated Douglass's later speeches and writings. By the late 1800s and early 1900s, drawing on the black experience and intellectual tradition, W.E.B. Du Bois was working from a conceptual perspective viewing U.S. society as pervaded by racism across major institutions. He was probably the first social scientist to analyze the emergence of the dominant idea of whiteness and of a white-racist order extending beyond the United States. Writing of the years around 1900, Du Bois argued:

> White supremacy was all but world-wide. Africa was dead, India conquered, Japan isolated, and China prostrate.... The using of men for the benefit of masters is no new invention of modern Europe.... But Europe proposed to apply it on a scale and with an elaborateness of detail of which no former world ever dreamed.[25]

In this era, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, important black activists and sociological thinkers, articulated not only an antiracist perspective, but also a clear view of character of white oppression of black men and women. As Wells-Barnett put it, black Americans have faced the "unbridled power exercised for two and a half centuries, by the white man over the

Negro," which during the Reconstruction and segregation eras after the Civil War showed itself in the "acts of conscienceless outlawry" called lynchings.[26]

The first extended analysis of U.S. society as a system of racism was probably that of Oliver Cox, who provided in the 1940s a book-length argument showing how sustained labor exploitation of black Americans created a centuries-old structure of "racial classes." In the case of African Americans, the white elite decided "to proletarianize a whole people—that is to say, the whole people is looked upon as a class—whereas white proletarianization involves only a section of the white people."[27] By the 1960s black activists and scholars were developing the institutional-racism perspective further. Drawing on Du Bois, Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton demonstrated in empirical and theoretical detail the importance of institutionalized racism—patterns of racism built into this society's major institutions, the discriminatory patterns involving much more than actions of scattered bigots. Moreover, by the late 1960s a few white scholars and analysts were also moving in the direction of accenting institutional racism. These race-critical black and white analysts saw racism as much more than demons in white minds, for white racism entails a complex array of racialized relationships developed over many generations and imbedded in all major societal institutions.[28]

Historically, the social-science study of racial oppression has often been identified by such terms as "intergroup relations" or "race relations." These somewhat ambiguous and euphemistic phrases are accented by many analysts who prefer to view an array of racial groups as more or less responsible for the U.S. "race problem." Such terminology, however, can allow the spotlight to be taken off the whites who have most centrally created and maintained the system of racism. In the North American case, systemic racism began with European colonists enriching themselves substantially at the expense of indigenous peoples and the Africans they imported for enslavement. This brutally executed enrichment was part of the new society's foundation.

In the rest of this chapter we will examine briefly some key aspects of systemic racism, including:

1. the patterns of **unjust impoverishment** and **unjust enrichment** and their transmission over time;
2. the resulting vested group interests and the alienating racist relations;
3. the costs and burdens of racism;
4. the important role of white elites;
5. the rationalization of racial oppression in a white-racist framing; and
6. the continuing resistance to racism.

Undeserved Impoverishment and Enrichment

Analyzing Europe's extensive colonization of Africa, Du Bois demonstrated that extreme poverty and degradation in the African colonies was "a main cause of wealth and luxury in Europe. The results of this poverty were disease, ignorance, and crime. Yet these had to be represented as natural characteristics of backward peoples."[29] The unjust and brutal exploitation of African labor and land had long been downplayed in most historical accounts of European affluence. By bringing the unjust impoverishment of Africa back into the picture, Du Bois provided evidence that this impoverishment was directly and centrally linked to European prosperity and affluence. A similar connection needs to be made between the immiseration and impoverishment of African Americans and the enrichment and prosperity of European Americans.

Several scholars have suggested extending the idea of *unjust enrichment*, an idea taken from the Anglo-American legal tradition, to discuss the reality and impact of racial oppression.[30] Unjust enrichment is an old legal term associated with relationships between individuals. One legal dictionary defines the concept as "circumstances which give rise to the obligation of restitution, that is, the receiving and retention of property, money, or benefits which in justice and equity belong to another."[31] This legal concept encompasses not only the receiving of benefits that justly belong to another but also the obligation to make restitution for that injustice. This idea can be extended beyond individual relationships envisioned in the traditional legal argument to the unjust theft of labor or resources by one group, such as white Americans, from another group, such as black Americans. I suggest here the parallel idea of *unjust impoverishment* to describe the conditions of those who suffer such oppression. For many generations the exploitation of African Americans has redistributed income and wealth earned by them (as slave laborers or segregated workers) to generations of white Americans, leaving the former relatively impoverished as a group and the latter relatively privileged and affluent as a group.

Occasionally, some influential white Americans have been able to see some of the scale of this unjust enrichment for African Americans. Thus, in his brief Second Inaugural Address in 1865, not long before he was assassinated, President Abraham Lincoln made this perceptive commentary on whites' ill-gotten wealth and its consequences. He noted that, at the beginning of the Civil War,

> One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves ... localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.... It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a

> just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.[32]

Lincoln here clearly noted the way in which some whites' prosperity had been generated off the sweat of black faces.

Racial Classes with Vested Group Interests

Understanding how this undeserved impoverishment and enrichment gets transmitted and institutionalized over generations of white and black Americans is an important step in developing an adequate conceptual framework for U.S. racism. Black labor was widely and unjustly used for building up the wealth of this white-dominated country from the 1600s to at least the 1960s—the slavery and Jim Crow segregation periods. Black Americans as a group were proletarianized to build up white prosperity. Racial classes (groups) are the rungs on the racist ladder and have divergent group interests.

Arising in Middle English, the word "interest" (literally "to be between") originally meant a share in something. A *group interest* can now be seen as a relation of being objectively concerned in something, of having a stake in something. Thus, whites are strong *stakeholders* in a centuries-old hierarchical structure of opportunities, wealth, and privileges that stems from a long history of racial exploitation and oppression. The interests of the white racial group have included not only a concrete interest in labor and other exploitation during the slavery and segregation periods, but also a concrete interest later on in maintaining the substantial economic and other social privileges inherited from white ancestors.

The racial hierarchy, initially created by the white ruling class, provided benefits to most white Americans. From the seventeenth century onward, the farms and plantations run with enslaved laborers brought significant income and wealth to many white Americans, and not just to their owners. These enterprises multiplied economic development for many whites inside and outside the farms' and plantations' immediate geographical areas (see Chapter 2, pp. 51–53). Ordinary whites, for the most part, bought into the identity of whiteness, thereby binding themselves collectively to the white racial group.

Slavery's impact extended well beyond the economy. Each major institutional arena in the country was controlled by whites and was linked to other major arenas. As we have seen, the new Constitution and its "democratic" political system were grounded in racist thinking and practices of white men, many with strong ties to slavery. Those who dominated the economic system also crafted the political system. Likewise the religious, legal, educational, and media systems were interlinked with the slavery economy and polity. Woven through each institutional

area was a broad racist framing centered on rationalizing white-on-black domination and assertively creating positive views of whites and whiteness.

Alienated Racist Relations

Systemic racism involves recurring and unequal relationships between groups and individuals. At the macro-level, large-scale institutions—with their white-controlled normative structures—routinely perpetuate racial subordination and inequalities. These institutions are created and recreated by routine actions at the everyday micro-level by particular individuals. People do not experience "race" in the abstract but in concrete recurring relationships with one another. Individuals, whether perpetrators of discrimination or recipients of discrimination, are caught in a web of alienating racist relations. These socially imbedded relations distort what could be positive and egalitarian relationships into alienated relationships. The racist system categorizes and divides human beings from each other and severely impedes the development of a common consciousness and solidarity. It fractures human nature by separating those socially defined as the "superior race" against those socially defined as the "inferior race." Life under a system of racism involves an ongoing struggle between racially defined human communities—one seeking to preserve its unjustly derived status and privileges and the other seeking to resist or overthrow its continuing oppression.[33]

The alienation associated with racial oppression extends to yet other areas. In the case of black Americans, that which should most be their own—control over their lives and work—is that which is substantially taken away from them by systemic racism. There is a parallel here to the alienation described by analysts of class and gender oppression. In Karl Marx's analysis of capitalism, the workers' labor, that which in one sense is most their own, is that which is most taken away from their control by the capitalist employer. The worker is separated from control over, and thus alienated from, his or her work. In addition, feminist theorists have shown that at the heart of a sexist society is an alienating reality of dehumanized sexuality. Women are separated by intentional and institutional sexism from personal control over how their own sexuality is defined. To lose significant control over one's own life choices, body definition, future, and even self, is what social subordination imposes. Thus, racial oppression forces a life-long struggle by black Americans, as a group and as individuals, to attain their inalienable human rights.[34]

In some theorizing about contemporary inequalities, racial matters have been more or less reduced to issues of class, as in some neo-Marxist work, or to issues of socioeconomic status, as in some work of William Julius Wilson. Many analysts have argued that racism is of declining

importance.[35] These positions have been rigorously contested. Michael Omi and Howard Winant have shown with much evidence that "race" cannot be reduced to ethnicity or class, but is an "autonomous field of social conflict, political organization and cultural/ideological meaning."[36]

However, even among those analysts who take contemporary racism seriously, such as Omi and Winant and Robert Miles,[37] there is a bit too much emphasis on the ideological construction of race and/or the formation of racial meanings and identities. While these are certainly important aspects of systemic racism (see Chapters 3 and 4), they are not necessarily the most important. As is clear in chapters that follow, the conceptual framework I accent here is grounded in an understanding of the concrete material advantages whites have gained unjustly over centuries of slavery, segregation, and contemporary racism.

Systemic racism is not just about the construction of racial images, attitudes, and identities. It is centrally about the creation, development, and maintenance of white privilege, economic wealth, and sociopolitical power over nearly four centuries. It is about hierarchical interaction and dominance. The past and present worlds of racism include not only racist relations at work but also the racist relations that black Americans and other Americans of color encounter in trying to secure adequate housing, consumer goods, and public accommodations for themselves and their families. As Cornel West has put it, "Categories are constructed. Scars and bruises are felt with human bodies, some of which end up in coffins. Death is not a construct."[38]

Patterns of Undeserved Enrichment and Impoverishment

Not long ago, Senator Bob Dole, a Republican presidential candidate, spoke in a television interview of "displaced" white men who compete with black workers because of **affirmative action**. He said that he was not sure that "people in America" (he meant "whites") should be paying a price for discrimination that occurred "before they were born." He was candid, saying, "We did discriminate. We did suppress people. It was wrong. Slavery was wrong." Yet Dole added that he was not sure any compensation for this damage was now due.[39] Whites' questioning of the relevance of our racist past to our present society is now commonplace.

Sources of White Wealth: A Vignette

Consider four young children coming into certain North American colonies in the early 1700s. An African brother and sister are ripped from their homes and imported in chains into Virginia, the largest slaveholding colony. Their African names being ignored, they are renamed "negro John" and "negro Mary" (no last name) by the white family that purchased them from a slave ship. This white (Smith) family has young twins, William and Priscilla. Their first and last names are those given to them by their parents, and they never wear chains. The enslaved children are seen and named as "black" by the Smith family, while the twins will live as "white."

What do these children and their descendants have to look forward to? Their experiences will be very different as a result of the system of racist oppression. William's and Priscilla's lives may be hard because of the physical environment, but they and their descendants will likely build lives with an array of personal choices and the passing down of significant social resources. As a girl and later as a woman, Priscilla will certainly not have the same privileges as William, but her life is more likely to be economically supported and protected than Mary's. Indeed, John and Mary face a stark, often violent existence, with most of their lives determined by the whims of the slaveholder who has stolen not only their labor but their lives. They will never see their families or home societies again. They can be radically separated at any time, a fate much less likely for William and Priscilla. From their labor and other enslaved labor some wealth will be generated for the Smith family and passed to later generations. Unlike the white twins, John and Mary will probably not be allowed to read or write and will be forced to replace their African language with English. Where they work and sleep will be substantially determined by whites. As they grow, major decisions about their personal and family relationships will be made by whites. Mary will face repeated sexual threats, coercion, and violence at the hands of male overseers and slaveholders, perhaps including William. Moreover, if John even looks at Priscilla the wrong way, he is likely to be punished severely.

If John and Mary are later allowed to have spouses and children, they will face a much greater infant mortality rate than whites. And their surviving children may well be taken from them, so that they and later generations may have great difficulty in keeping the full memory of their ancestors, a problem not faced by William and Priscilla. If John or Mary resist oppression, they are likely to be whipped, put in chains, or have an iron bit put in their mouths. If John is rebellious or runs away too much, he may face castration. John and Mary will have to struggle very hard to keep their families together because the slaveholders can destroy them at any moment. Still, together with other black Americans, they build a culture of resistance carried from generation to generation in oral traditions. Moreover, for many more generations John's and Mary's descendants will suffer similarly severe conditions as the property of white families. Few if any of their descendants will see freedom until the 1860s.

The end of slavery does not end the large-scale oppression faced by John's and Mary's descendants. For four more generations after 1865 the near-slavery called legal or de facto segregation will confront them, but will not racially restrict the lives of descendants of William and Priscilla.

The later black generations will be unable to build up significant resources and wealth; they will have their lives substantially determined by the white enforcers of Jim Crow segregation. Where they can get a job, where they can live, whether and where they can go to school, and how they can travel will still be substantially determined by whites. Many will face brutal beatings or lynchings by whites, especially if they resist oppression. They will likely have inherited no wealth from many generations of enslaved ancestors, and they are unlikely to garner much in the way of resources themselves to pass along to later generations. From the early 1700s to the 1960s, John and Mary and their descendants have been at an extreme economic, political, and social disadvantage compared to William and Priscilla Smith and their descendants. The lives of these African Americans have been significantly shortened, their opportunities severely limited, their inherited resources all but non-existent, and their families pressured by generations of well-organized white oppression.

The desegregation era of the 1960s did renew hopes for major changes in the racist system. But the changes came at a great price. For example, the parents of black children were forced to watch them be spat upon by howling mobs of whites seeking to stop racial desegregation. Since the **civil rights movement** forced an end to legal segregation in the 1960s, John's and Mary's descendants have had more opportunity to control their lives and to garner socioeconomic resources. Yet they too have faced large-scale discrimination in employment, housing, and other societal arenas because the 1960s' civil rights laws have often been unenforced. Descendants of William and Priscilla Smith have not faced such racial discrimination, nor have the many whites whose families came into the country after the end of slavery or legal segregation. Over the many generations since the early 1700s, John's and Mary's descendants have usually been unable to build up the economic, educational, and cultural resources necessary to compete effectively with typical white individuals and the significantly greater socioeconomic resources they mostly enjoy.

From this brief vignette we can begin to see how racial oppression is economically and systematically constructed. Unjust impoverishment for John and Mary and undeserved enrichment for William and Priscilla become bequeathed inheritances for many later generations. Undeserved impoverishment and enrichment are at the heart of colonial land theft from indigenous societies and the brutal slavery system targeting people of African descent. Over time this ill-gotten gain has been used and invested by white colonizers and their descendants to construct a prosperous white-dominated country. Today there is often a denial in the white population that African Americans have contributed substantially to American (or Western) development and civilization. However, the facts are clear: the slavery system provided much stimulus for economic development

and generated critical surplus capital for the new nation. As we will see in Chapter 2, without the enslaved labor of millions of black Americans, there might well not be a prosperous United States today.

Extorting More Resources: Legal Segregation

Once in place, oppressive institutions have demonstrated great social inertia and persistence. When the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution put an end to African American enslavement, systemic racism soon took the form of officially sanctioned segregation. Like slavery, widespread segregation was implemented under the cover of law. Extensive Jim Crow segregation of free African Americans—in employment, housing, the justice system, and politics—had already been invented in the North in the 1700s and early 1800s. It was firmly in place there when southern elites adopted it.[40]

The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery but did not abolish the new racial barriers faced by those formerly enslaved. After the Civil War, the status of being enslaved by an individual master was replaced by a condition of being a "slave to white society," in the North and the South. Access to significant wealth-building resources was for the most part not open to the technically "free" African Americans. In contrast, whites coming of age in the century between the end of slavery and the 1960s—including recent immigrants—were mostly able to accumulate significant family resources or individual opportunities, unfairly and very disproportionately, because there was little or no black competition for many important socioeconomic resources and opportunities. As we will see later, these resources and opportunities included, among other things, decent-paying jobs, quality educations, good farm land, oil leases, airline routes, radio and television frequencies, and good housing areas. The new barriers of racial segregation were regularly enforced by individual whites and organized white violence, including police brutality, house burnings, beatings, and lynchings.

Contemporary Racism: More Enrichment and Impoverishment

With the end of Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s came some changes in the operation of systemic racism. For the first time African Americans had, at least officially, access to many areas of the economy and larger society off-limits to them for centuries. However, the political and legal changes of the contemporary era have by no means eradicated white-imposed racism as the foundation of the U.S. "house." Since the 1960s, racial oppression has persisted in the form of widespread discrimination against African Americans and numerous other Americans of color—often in violation of U.S. civil rights laws. To make matters worse, these laws have often been weakly enforced. Some continuing oppression of black Americans is more

covert or subtle than in the past, and this can make racist practices more difficult to see for those who are not the targets. Nonetheless, racism is still systemic and webbed across all sectors of this society. Whites still dominate almost every major organization and most major resources, be they economic, political, educational, or legal. And official violence against African Americans can still be seen in recurring instances of police malpractice and brutality.

In Chapters 5–7, I provide much detail in regard to the current racial discrimination targeting African Americans and its advantages for whites. Here we can briefly note one example: like the legally segregated economy of the 1950s, the contemporary economy channels many black Americans into certain types of jobs and away from other types of employment. Many do not have access to good-paying jobs—or face unemployment—because of intentional discrimination in the job market or because of the use of certain screening barriers by white employers that reflect the lack of access by black workers to white-dominated job networks or to adequate job training or educational programs. Today, many low-wage service and unskilled menial jobs are held by African Americans or other people of color who regularly service white managers, white employers, or white skilled workers. As Iris Young explains, "These jobs entail a transfer of energies whereby the servers enhance the status of those served."[41] In addition, even those black workers who do secure good-paying jobs still face numerous other discriminatory hurdles such as hostile workplace climates and discrimination in promotions. Over time, thus, employment discrimination has serious consequences that take the form of yet more undeserved impoverishment for black workers and their families, and yet more unfair enrichment for white workers and their families. Today, the mechanisms of racial discrimination and de facto segregation continue to operate in major areas of U.S. society.

Social Reproduction: Transmitting Wealth over Generations

How does prior wealth and privilege, however gained in one generation, translate into wealth and privilege for later generations? And what are the main forms of socioeconomic resources that are transmitted? More generally, how is the societal system of racial inequality reproduced as a whole? An inter-temporal perspective on racial discrimination and related oppression is critical to a comprehensive understanding of the development and structure of U.S. society. I accent here the concept of the ***social reproduction*** of racial oppression.

For systemic racism to persist across many human generations, it must reproduce well and routinely the necessary socioeconomic conditions. These conditions include substantial control by whites of major economic resources and possession of the political, police, and ideological power

to dominate subordinated racial groups. Systemic racism is perpetuated by social processes that reproduce not only racial inequality but also the fundamental racist relation—on the one hand, the racially oppressed, and on the other, the racial oppressors. This alienated relationship, which undergirds the racial hierarchy, is reproduced across all areas of societal life, from one neighborhood to the next, from one generation to the next.

The perpetuation of systemic racism requires an *inter-temporal* reproducing of a variety of important organizational structures and institutional and ideological processes. These structures and processes are critical to sustaining racial inequalities. Reproduced over time are racially structured institutions, such as economic institutions that embed the exploitation of black labor and the legal and political institutions that protect that exploitation and extend oppression into other arenas of societal life. Each new generation inherits the established organizational structures that protect unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment. Important too is the reproduction from one generation to the next of the interpretive and ideological apparatus, the ***white racial frame*** (see below, pp. 25–26) that rationalizes and legitimates racial oppression.

By the 1700s, slavery was well-entrenched and profitable for a great many whites, including slaveholders and those servicing or trading with slave farms and plantations. After the initiation of slavery, the next step was its perpetuation and maintenance, not only in terms of meeting the internal requirements but also in terms of countering challenges. Much effort went into reinforcing and expanding this oppressive system. Numerous laws were passed; courts were used to sustain it. Slave insurrections had to be protected against, so white patrols were created to police those enslaved. The political system, including its founding documents, was shaped in response to the need to protect this slavery economy. This oppressive political-economic system was succeeded, in the late nineteenth century, by the near-slavery of Jim Crow.

For many generations this deeply imbedded system of racial inequality has been regularly reproduced. Today, most whites underestimate the degree to which the United States remains a very racist society. They underestimate the extent of white racial privileges and resources and the degree to which these privileges and resources have been passed down from their predecessors. Social inheritance mechanisms are imbedded in society and disguised to make inter-temporal inheritance appear fair. Each new generation of whites has inherited an array of racial privileges and resources. Over time, the majority of whites inherit some economic resources—often in the form of house equity or family savings—or other resources such as access to job training or a good education.

For example, recent Federal Reserve studies show huge differentials in household wealth between white and black families (see Chapter 6,

p. 20). White families' net worth is now about *ten-times* that of black families' net worth, with much of that in housing equities built up over generations of discrimination severely limiting black access to housing and other socioeconomic resources. For example, almost all the home mortgages provided on a large scale to soldiers returning after World War II went to white soldiers and their families. Mortgage and other housing discrimination was commonplace and open until the late 1960s. And much housing discrimination has continued, if often more subtly and covertly, since that decade. Most significantly, the white wealth built up in these housing equities has often been passed along to children and grandchildren.[42]

Even the relatively poor immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the early 1900s were, within a generation or so, defined as "white." Although they faced some initial discrimination, they and their descendants benefited greatly from the far more extensive racial discrimination then restricting black Americans. These new whites often participated in that antiblack discrimination. In a generation or two, they or their descendants were able to move up economically, politically, and socially. This is a striking societal result, given the fact that the average black American then (as now) had ancestors going back several more generations in this country's history than these relatively new white Americans.[43]

Not only do most whites today benefit from inheritance of some, or a lot of, economic and cultural wealth from ancestors who profited from slavery or legal segregation, but most also benefit from contemporary racist patterns—the job, housing, political, educational, and other discrimination that still gives them and their children significant advantages over black Americans. While white Americans vary by class and gender in the scale of these **white privileges** and inherited wealth, most in all walks of life have benefited to some degree from white privileges and resources (see Chapter 6, pp. 190–200). Note too that the vital resources inherited by a great many whites over time also include educational and other cultural wealth. Edward Ball, a slaveholder's descendant, has noted, "If we did not inherit money, or land, we received a great fund of cultural capital, including prestige, a chance at an education, self-esteem, a sense of place, mobility, even (in some cases) a flair for giving orders."[44] Interestingly, Ball is one of several white descendants of powerful slaveholding families who have recently acknowledged the substantial inheritances they gained from their slaveholding ancestors.

The Extraordinary Costs and Burdens of Racism

Unjustly gained wealth and privilege for whites is often linked directly to undeserved immiseration for black Americans. This was true for many past generations, and it remains true for today's generations. What does it

cost to be black in the United States? Government reports regularly repeat the grim statistics: the average black person has *a life expectancy four to six years (female/male) less* than the average white person. An average black family earns *less than two-thirds the income* of an average white family—*and has about 10 percent of the economic net worth* of an average white family. These data signal the cumulative cost of white racism for black Americans.

Acts of oppression are not just immediately harmful, but carry long-term effects. In the social-science literature, much has been made of the impact of historical racism on black families, subculture, or values, sometimes as part of a blame-the-victim perspective. At least as important is the impact of systemic racism on the social, economic, political, and educational resources and opportunities available to black individuals and families for ten-to-fifteen generations. If the members of a group suffer serious bars to securing the resources necessary for achievement and mobility, this not only restricts their own achievements but also shapes the opportunities of descendants for generations to come.[45]

When men and women of color do not have significant and equivalent access to inherited savings or other economic resources, or to cultural capital such as a good education, or to important job skills because of blatant or subtle discrimination, they usually cannot prosper like more privileged whites. And they and their descendants will likely have a serious and persisting disadvantage relative to whites. Thus, researchers have shown that the cumulative lack of wealth for black families often has a serious impact on children. One recent analysis examined the amount of time that the average black, white, and Latino child is likely to spend growing up in a substantially impoverished neighborhood. The study estimated that the average black child spends about half his or her first 18 years in such impoverished neighborhoods. This compares to about 40 percent of these years for average Latino children, but only 5 percent of these years for average white children. Being born in such an impoverished neighborhood was found to be the most determinative factor for spending much of one's youth there. Parental mobility in and out of such neighborhoods was a factor, but not as important as just being born there.[46]

The value of having money and other economic resources in hand is critical, for once a group is far ahead in terms of resources it is very difficult for another group without access to those resources, or even with modest new resources, to catch up, even over a substantial period of time. When entry to employment, education, or business is blocked by slavery, legal segregation, or widespread informal discrimination today, African Americans have infinite entry costs. Even if these racial barriers are

removed at some later point, and African Americans are finally allowed to enter once exclusively white societal arenas, they will likely enter with more significant resource and operational problems, including higher personal or business costs, than whites who have not faced massive discrimination in the past or present (see Chapter 6, pp. 200–212). Moreover, for African Americans and other Americans of color, everyday racism generally involves not only living with fewer socioeconomic resources, but also enduring the consciousness that grows out of and reflects on racially oppressive conditions.

Most theories about U.S. racial matters do not take seriously enough the existential perspective of the oppressed others, their everyday experiential intelligence. When black men, women, and children speak of being black in a country largely controlled at the top by whites, they typically do not speak in abstract concepts learned from books, but rather voice accounts of encounters with whites. Take this account from an interview with a black woman, a dental assistant, who describes a black child's experience:

> [An] incident happened to my girlfriend's daughter about a month or so ago. She's in a Christian school. And the teacher told the kids that black, black children are born with their sin. And the little girl went home and she asked her mother, she said, "Sit down," and told her mother. She said, "I just wish I was white." And she's only nine, she's nine.... And [the] little girl had said what the teacher had said, and she said, "Black people were born of sin, let's pray for the black people." And now the little girl is really scarred, but you don't know how scarred ... and that kind of stuff makes you angry. You take a little child that doesn't know anything about prejudice, and this is the way you plant it ... in all these little white children's heads.[47]

The white teacher in this religious elementary school appears to be drawing on one of the oldest explanations of black inferiority, the mythological story of Noah condemning his black son Ham's descendants to be the servants of whites (see Chapter 3, p. 63). We see here the operation of the racialized hierarchy of power—the perhaps unthinking use of a white person's power to cause a black child and the adults who love her much damage.

We see too that racism is a *lived* experience. Racist relations recur frequently in the lives of most black Americans. Whites generate much pain, frustration, stress, and anger. We see the white-generated alienation of a black child from herself, and perhaps from her community. Racism means that what should be most her own, the control of her self and identity, is what is often taken away. This account suggests that theories of racial oppression should take seriously the life experiences and experiential intelligence of black Americans and other Americans of color. They know well the oppressive world that hits them in the face on a routine basis. This gives them a well-developed knowledge base from which they can develop sophisticated, and usually collective, understandings of racism.

White Elites and Ordinary Whites: The Public Wage of Whiteness

European and European American elites began the large-scale exploitation of the labor of African Americans and the land of Native Americans. Ever since, white elites have acted aggressively to create or maintain the social, economic, and political organizations and institutions, as well as conceptual framing, that reflect their interests. The actions of white economic elites—originally composed of slaveholders, traders, and merchants, but later of industrialists and other entrepreneurs—and political elites are critical for the creation and maintenance of the racist system. White elites crafted and reworked the system at critical junctures in U.S. history, and were central to its rationalization. Significantly, the makeup of those drafting the U.S. Constitution is similar to the demographic makeup of those who still disproportionately dominate the top positions in most sectors of U.S. society today.

For several centuries, most whites not in the elites have accepted the society's racist hierarchy because of their access to the privileges, opportunities, and cultural resources associated with being white and because they have bought heavily into a white-racist framing of society. Thus, white workers have accepted what W.E.B. Du Bois once called the "public and **psychological wage**" of whiteness, instead of the greater economic wages and better working conditions they might have had if they had joined over the last century in strong worker and other organizations with black workers.[48] In the United States, unlike in numerous European capitalist countries, class consciousness among white workers has to a substantial degree been lessened by a strong racial consciousness (see Chapter 6, pp. 215–216).

By the late seventeenth century many in the colonial elites were concerned about the resistance of white laborers and small farmers to elite rule. Critical to the development of the colonial economic system was the problem of labor. At first, the farmers who worked on a large scale made use of significant numbers of white laborers, the property-less European immigrants who were often indentured servants. These white servants and laborers revolted a number of times against social class oppression. Sometimes they were joined by enslaved African Americans, as in Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, against the elite administration of the colonies. Indeed, the possibility of such biracial coalitions was a serious concern among white elites. Out of this fear was born, at least in part, the extension to property-less whites of certain privileges of whiteness,

removed at some later point, and African Americans are finally allowed to enter once exclusively white societal arenas, they will likely enter with more significant resource and operational problems, including higher personal or business costs, than whites who have not faced massive discrimination in the past or present (see Chapter 6, pp. 200–212). Moreover, for African Americans and other Americans of color, everyday racism generally involves not only living with fewer socioeconomic resources, but also enduring the consciousness that grows out of and reflects on racially oppressive conditions.

Most theories about U.S. racial matters do not take seriously enough the existential perspective of the oppressed others, their everyday experiential intelligence. When black men, women, and children speak of being black in a country largely controlled at the top by whites, they typically do not speak in abstract concepts learned from books, but rather voice accounts of encounters with whites. Take this account from an interview with a black woman, a dental assistant, who describes a black child's experience:

> [An] incident happened to my girlfriend's daughter about a month or so ago. She's in a Christian school. And the teacher told the kids that black, black children are born with their sin. And the little girl went home and she asked her mother, she said, "Sit down," and told her mother. She said, "I just wish I was white." And she's only nine, she's nine.... And [the] little girl had said what the teacher had said, and she said, "Black people were born of sin, let's pray for the black people." And now the little girl is really scarred, but you don't know how scarred ... and that kind of stuff makes you angry. You take a little child that doesn't know anything about prejudice, and this is the way you plant it ... in all these little white children's heads.[47]

The white teacher in this religious elementary school appears to be drawing on one of the oldest explanations of black inferiority, the mythological story of Noah condemning his black son Ham's descendants to be the servants of whites (see Chapter 3, p. 63). We see here the operation of the racialized hierarchy of power—the perhaps unthinking use of a white person's power to cause a black child and the adults who love her much damage.

We see too that racism is a *lived* experience. Racist relations recur frequently in the lives of most black Americans. Whites generate much pain, frustration, stress, and anger. We see the white-generated alienation of a black child from herself, and perhaps from her community. Racism means that what should be most her own, the control of her self and identity, is what is often taken away. This account suggests that theories of racial oppression should take seriously the life experiences and experiential

intelligence of black Americans and other Americans of color. They know well the oppressive world that hits them in the face on a routine basis. This gives them a well-developed knowledge base from which they can develop sophisticated, and usually collective, understandings of racism.

White Elites and Ordinary Whites: The Public Wage of Whiteness

European and European American elites began the large-scale exploitation of the labor of African Americans and the land of Native Americans. Ever since, white elites have acted aggressively to create or maintain the social, economic, and political organizations and institutions, as well as conceptual framing, that reflect their interests. The actions of white economic elites—originally composed of slaveholders, traders, and merchants, but later of industrialists and other entrepreneurs—and political elites are critical for the creation and maintenance of the racist system. White elites crafted and reworked the system at critical junctures in U.S. history, and were central to its rationalization. Significantly, the makeup of those drafting the U.S. Constitution is similar to the demographic makeup of those who still disproportionately dominate the top positions in most sectors of U.S. society today.

For several centuries, most whites not in the elites have accepted the society's racist hierarchy because of their access to the privileges, opportunities, and cultural resources associated with being white and because they have bought heavily into a white-racist framing of society. Thus, white workers have accepted what W.E.B. Du Bois once called the "public and **psychological wage**" of whiteness, instead of the greater economic wages and better working conditions they might have had if they had joined over the last century in strong worker and other organizations with black workers.[48] In the United States, unlike in numerous European capitalist countries, class consciousness among white workers has to a substantial degree been lessened by a strong racial consciousness (see Chapter 6, pp. 215–216).

By the late seventeenth century many in the colonial elites were concerned about the resistance of white laborers and small farmers to elite rule. Critical to the development of the colonial economic system was the problem of labor. At first, the farmers who worked on a large scale made use of significant numbers of white laborers, the property-less European immigrants who were often indentured servants. These white servants and laborers revolted a number of times against social class oppression. Sometimes they were joined by enslaved African Americans, as in Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, against the elite administration of the colonies. Indeed, the possibility of such biracial coalitions was a serious concern among white elites. Out of this fear was born, at least in part, the extension to property-less whites of certain privileges of whiteness,

as well as an extensive racist framing rationalizing white superiority. The creation of a system in which only Americans of color could be enslaved was coupled with accenting racial solidarity across the white economic classes.[49]

Just after the Civil War, the elite-crafted social and ideological arrangements that deflected white workers' class consciousness were threatened by the new freedom for ordinary blacks and small white farmers that emerged with the destruction of slavery and the implementation of more democratic governments in the South during the era called Reconstruction. On occasion, blacks and some whites joined again in mutual-aid organizations, such as militant farmers' organizations working for better farming conditions in the late nineteenth century. It was not long, however, before the old elites in the South recovered their positions by aggressively buying off ordinary white farmers and workers with a renewed racist framing of society that made whites of all classes feel racially superior, as well as by the use of violence against African Americans and some white political activists.[50]

This history is important to understanding how systemic racism was perpetuated over time. To a substantial degree, social-class oppression is obscured by the elites' use of a white-racist framing of society and by white workers' fully accepting that framing and the concrete advantages they viewed as stemming from it. Thus, for the most part, white labor leaders in the union movements that expanded from the mid-1800s to the 1960s collaborated in maintaining the system of black workers' exclusion and white workers' racial privileges. White union leaders were often outspoken in their ideological racism and commitment to racially exclusionary barriers. In addition, we should consider some shifts in the last half of the nineteenth century in the views and allegiances of numerous white women who had been active in the abolitionist movements and outspoken against slavery earlier in the century. Once slavery was abolished, and the movement for women's rights accelerated in the late nineteenth century, numerous white leaders in this women's movement dismissed the significant concerns of black women and developed racially segregated political interests and organizations. The majority of the white female leaders in this feminist political movement accepted white racial privileges and the new racist theories of U.S. imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century with little or no questioning.[51]

In later chapters we will observe the intensity of white identity and white-racist attitudes in many aspects of U.S. history and society. A common racial identity has persisted for centuries across class and gender lines. In contrast, there is no similar trans-racial world of workers in which all workers hold a strong and common class identity and loyalty across the racial line. Nor is there a trans-racial world of gender where all women (or all men) hold a strong common identity and loyalty across the color line. Historically, most white workers and most white women have been uninterested in building unity of identity and protest with, respectively, black workers or black women across the color line.

The White Racial Frame: Rationalizing Racial Oppression

Historically, most whites have not been content to exploit African Americans and other Americans of color and then to just admit candidly that such action is crass exploitation for their own individual or group advantage. Instead, white Americans have developed a strong racial frame that interprets and defends white privileges and advantaged conditions as meritorious and accents white virtues as well as the alleged inferiority and deficiencies of those people of color who are oppressed.

In recent decades, cognitive, neurological, and social scientists have developed the idea of a perspectival frame that gets imbedded in individual minds (in the brain's neural networks) and helps people interpret and deal with situations encountered in everyday lives. In their everyday rounds, people use multiple frames, but the one I accent here is the dominant, white-created racial frame that provides an over-arching and racialized worldview extending across divisions of class, gender, and age. Since the seventeenth century, this powerful *white racial frame* has provided the vantage point from which whites and others have regularly viewed and interpreted this society. This broad racial framing includes at least these important dimensions:

1. racial **stereotypes** (a verbal–cognitive aspect);
2. racial narratives and interpretations (integrating cognitive aspects);
3. racial images (a visual aspect) and language accents (an auditory aspect);
4. racialized emotions (a "feelings" aspect); and
5. inclinations to discriminatory action.[52]

As we will see in detail in Chapters 3 and 4, this dominant racial frame includes a socially imbedded set of racial stereotypes, images, and emotions that are widely accepted and critical to maintaining the subordination of black Americans and other Americans of color. Over centuries now, this strong framing has had a very positive orientation to whites and whiteness and a negative orientation to the racial "others" who are oppressed. Early on, this over-arching framing assertively accented a positive view of white superiority, virtue, and moral goodness. Whites have rationalized U.S. society's dominant racial hierarchy by defining "superior" groups who are "justifiably" dominant and "inferior" groups who "deserve" their lower place in society. For most whites, this dominant racial frame is

more than one perspectival frame among many. Indeed, it is a worldview that has routinely defined a way of being and acting, a broad perspective on life, and one that provides the language and interpretations that structure, normalize, and make sense out of much in this society. Moreover, almost all Americans, of various racial and other backgrounds, are indoctrinated to some extent in elements of this white racial frame, from their earliest years.

Once developed and imbedded in human minds, the white racial frame did become, and still is, a *concrete force* in Western and global history. Today, as in the past, the impoverishment and enrichment stemming from centuries of slavery, legal segregation, and contemporary racism are rationalized by this extensive framing with its racial myths, prejudices, stereotypes, narratives, and images. We have noted previously how the founders' myths about liberty co-existed with the extreme exploitation and subordination of Native Americans and African Americans. White elites have long been indispensable for this myth-making process, for they have long created or reformulated the central legitimizing frame by means of the mass media, schools, workplaces, legislatures, and churches.

The Central Idea of Whiteness

In the first extended analysis of whiteness, the pioneering book *Darkwater* (1920), sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois noted that

> the discovery of personal whiteness among the world's people is a very modern thing.... The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction ... we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful![53]

The early articulations of whiteness as a defense of white power and privilege came from slaveholders and others who sought to rationalize slavery. The generally darker skin (early called "black") of Africans was used by white slaveholders and other whites as an early marker of subordinated status. The skin-color imagery was part of a larger conceptual framing among Europeans that had long before viewed most aspects of "blackness" in negative terms, as relating to the devil and darkness. By the late-1600s whiteness, in contrast, stood for "civilization" and advanced "culture" among Europeans and European Americans.[54]

According to Benjamin Franklin, a liberal U.S. founder, the ideal of the virtuous American was grounded in whiteness. "[T]he number of purely white people in the world is proportionably very small," he said. "Why increase the sons of Africa, by planting them in America, where we have so fair an opportunity, by excluding all blacks and tawneys, of increasing the lovely white and red?"[55] Even the political liberals among the founders, those opposed to importing more enslaved Africans, held strong antiblack images and saw their preferences for "lovely white" people as quite normal and natural.

Aggressive Biological Racism

By the late eighteenth century, a virulently racist framing of society had been created, and it came to dominate most white views on "race" for the next two centuries. Images of "lovely whiteness" were soon wedded to a very strong biological racism, a deterministic view that saw white Americans as the biologically and intellectually "superior race" and black Americans as the biologically and intellectually "inferior race." Influential scholars and intellectuals like Immanuel Kant in Europe and Thomas Jefferson in the U.S. lent their authority to the aggressive notion of a hierarchy of "races" (see Chapter 3, pp. 69–70). This reinvigorated biological racism developed by leading Western intellectuals in the late 1700s was spread by newspapers, pamphlets, and pulpits of the day to the general population. Over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a strong biological view of a hierarchy of races came to accompany older antiblack views accenting black inferiority in culture, religion, and civilization. As we will see in later chapters, in the early twentieth century the developing motion picture, radio, magazine, and television industries further accelerated the spread of this racist framing of African Americans to all corners of U.S. society and, eventually, the globe.

Today, numerous social scientists and many popular analysts view racism as mainly about racial attitudes, as personal prejudices "directed at people because of their race."[56] They focus on the micro-level of the bigoted individual. Although this conventional perspective recognizes some relational aspects of U.S. racism, it frequently overlooks the point that the prejudices held by individuals are still rooted firmly in an extensive *system* of racism. As Oliver Cox put it, "race prejudice is not an individual idiosyncrasy; it is a social attribute. Ordinarily the individual is born into it and accepts it unconsciously, like his language, without question." Antiblack prejudices have been socially perpetuated as a way of stigmatizing black Americans "as inferior so that the exploitation of either the group itself or its resources or both may be justified."[57] Today, as in the past, antiblack attitudes are deeply imbedded in European American culture and are part of the well-developed white-racist framing that has dominated white society for centuries now.

Resisting Systemic Racism

A comprehensive theory of systemic racism should encompass the dialectical idea that oppression creates the seeds of its own destruction. Historical analysis indicates that racist oppression regularly breeds

resistance. Racist structures heavily shape the lives of human beings, but when human agents gain a solid understanding of weaknesses in these structures of oppression, they can use that knowledge to rebel, sometimes successfully.

The social process that reproduces systemic racism has major contradictions. One important contradiction is that racially subordinated groups like black Americans have for some time been allowed access to certain limited resources so that they can survive and be useful to the economy. However, when they have secured some resources beyond subsistence, they have often increased their individual and collective resistance to oppression. Human beings have a unique ability to reflect on their own circumstances and to create, in association with others, a collective consciousness that can lead to social change. Thus, because black women and men have long been at the center of the racist system, their protest consciousness has great potential for re-making or destroying that onerous system. Periodically, changes in the racist system have been forced by the antiracist consciousness and organizational efforts of African Americans. We see evidence of this in the many conspiracies to revolt, and periodic insurrections, of enslaved African Americans that took place between the mid-1600s and the 1850s (see Chapter 8, p. 269). In addition, in the decades before the Civil War, hundreds of thousands of black and white abolitionists organized actively against slavery, thereby helping to bring it down.

Continuing resistance to systemic racism could again be seen in the rise of the Niagara movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the early 1900s, which built a strong tradition of legal action and educational efforts against Jim Crow segregation and other racial discrimination (see Chapter 8, pp. 270–272). These movements laid the basis for later civil rights movements that brought some changes in the operation of systemic racism by the 1960s and 1970s. Over their long and arduous history in North America, African Americans have created or participated in many resistance organizations, some of which are still working actively to end systemic racism.

From the beginning, black Americans, as well as other Americans of color, have generally been the theorists of their own experiences with systemic racism, as they have made clear in a long history of antidiscrimination manifestos and protests. In each period of overt struggle by black Americans against racism, the renewed development of antiracist perspectives is often viewed by white Americans with great alarm. Black protest against oppression has encompassed not only overt confrontation with the dominant group but also the development of a critical perspective on the surrounding racist world, an antiracist framing generated from daily fighting domination. Nothing is a clearer thread

running through the tapestry of U.S. history than recurring African American struggles against racial oppression.

Conclusion

The United States can be seen in metaphorical terms as a "house" of racism, one with a political-economic foundation firmly built during the first two centuries of colonial development. While many of the founders asserted in the Declaration of Independence and elsewhere that "all men are created equal," they did not mean literally what they said. Their equality and liberty framing was conditional and hypocritical, for it excluded black Americans, indigenous peoples, and white women. The real U.S. foundation was crafted to create wealth and privilege for those transplanted Europeans who stole the lands of the indigenous peoples and enslaved African labor. In this process, Europeans and European Americans came to frame themselves and their society as a "white" republic.

Since this house of racial domination was created, it has periodically been remodeled. We observe remodeling in the Reconstruction period after the Civil War and again during and after the 1950s–1960s civil rights movement. When progressive changes have come in the racist system, white elites—always with debate and divisions among themselves—have typically worked to make the least significant changes possible under conditions of mass protest. Never have elites been interested in changes that would be substantial enough to build a new non-racist foundation and political-economic structure. Thus, under pressure from black and white abolitionists, and reacting to the impact of the Civil War, the liberal wing of the white leadership finally saw to it that slavery was abolished in the 1860s by an amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, in spite of this constitutional eradication of slavery, no new constitutional convention was called so that a new governing document could be democratically written with the participation of all Americans, including those newly freed from enslavement. Moreover, the white elites created, in the North and South, a new system of near slavery called Jim Crow segregation. Every major sector of U.S. society—the economy, politics and the law, education, and the media—was still run by and for whites, with the elites generally making the most important decisions.

When black protest movements in the 1960s forced the white leadership to again consider significant societal changes, this elite made modest changes in the racist system. They passed important civil rights laws and issued major court decisions against formal segregation, but over the next few decades they also saw to it that the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and regulations would mostly be weak. Legal segregation ended, but little compensation for past oppression was provided, and informal

patterns of racial discrimination persisted on a large scale. Most antidiscrimination programs have only been intended as modest efforts designed to fit some black Americans, other people of color, and white women into the Procrustean bed of historically white institutions. Today, most such institutions remain, mostly or disproportionately, white-male-controlled in their normative structures and white male in terms of those who hold top decisionmaking positions.